

THE HEART OF FAITH

by Dale Aukerman

Occasionally when working with a group, I have put a question something like this: If someone, thinking of you as a Christian, would ask, What is Christianity? What is the essence of it? What would your answer be? Responses typically take two directions. One points to Christianity as having to do with living a loving, Christ-like life. The other points toward believing in Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord.

I have devoted much of my life to Christian peace witness, and this question of what really is the heart of Christianity presents itself continually in such work. In the peace and justice movement, the living out of nonviolence and peacemaking and the struggle for justice are widely seen as the heart, the essence.

If we look to the New Testament as foundational for our understanding of Christianity, two aspects stand out: what God has done for us, and what God asks of us. God in Christ gave his all for us, and we are expected to give our all (something incomparably less) to God in response.

In the Christian understanding grounded in the New Testament, everything depends on God's initiative: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16a); "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19a); "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The expressive, reaching-out part of God entered into our human condition and lived as a human being in our midst; "the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

In the New Testament church, the good news had to do first of all with what God in Jesus Christ has done for humanity. The proclamation did not center in a body of ethical instruction. It was not an array of insights on how to go about living in the right way. It was not primarily a call to live out love (or nonviolence or the struggle for just social structures) because God wants us to. The good news focused most of all on God's revelation of his redeeming love in the coming, the dying, and the rising of Jesus of Nazareth. That focus can be seen in sermon after sermon throughout the Acts of the Apostles.

AGAIN AND AGAIN in the New Testament message is the recognition that human sin is an immense problem. In each of us is a defiant inclination to disregard God and go our own way. The more deeply a human parent loves an erring child, the more the parent is in agony because of the ruinous direction being taken by the child. And so far more, God. The parent might be willing to enter into any extremity of self-sacrifice to reach the defiant will of the child and turn it around. What this analogy points to, God lived out to the uttermost when Jesus met the focal concentration of all human presumption and wrong-headedness and let himself be executed on a Roman cross. Then the One done away with came back to welcome in love all those who were implicated in the deed, that is, each one of us.

It is clear in the four gospels that Jesus saw himself as more than a great teacher and example. He saw his death as uniquely crucial for the redemption of humanity. Intimations and explicit statements of that outlook frame the gospel narratives. "For the Chosen One came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11b). "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24); he viewed himself as the ultimate Passover lamb slain for the redemption of others.

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Martin Luther King Jr. foresaw that he would likely be killed. He gave his life in the struggle for what he believed in. He became a martyr for his cause. His dying deepened and intensified the meaning of his life. The death of Jesus can be seen as essentially like that, and in a secondary way it was. But Jesus himself and the New Testament writers saw it as the decisive event for making right the relationship between human beings and God. In our straying condition, we needed more than higher ethical teachings and persuasive appeals regarding how to live. We needed One through whose death and rising we are brought back into right relationship with God.

But there is a second part. God insists that we humans respond to what has been done for us in Jesus Christ. That response can be characterized as faith-obedience. We are to recognize the main elements of God's acting on our behalf and accept them in faith. That means, most of all, entering into a relationship with Jesus Christ, who comes to meet us as the Risen Lord. The One who died for us comes to relate to us as Friend, Brother, and Master. We are to live as disciples of this Lord, ardently seeking to follow his lead in all things.

In some streams within the history of the church, the human response has been seen very largely in terms of right beliefs about what God did for our salvation or simply in terms of "accepting Jesus Christ" as one's personal Savior (as in many evangelical churches now). In the Reformation period, the Anabaptists generally shared the historic beliefs of the church about God and Jesus Christ. But the Anabaptists and a number of later groups stressed that correct beliefs are not enough: Christians must strive to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus modeled and outlined how human life is to be lived. In this view the response of faith involves putting oneself and all one's living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who taught and exemplified what human life should be. Holding right beliefs or simply having a personal salvation experience leaves out much of what God asks for in our human response. This understanding is in sharp tension with much that passes for evangelical Christianity today.

The gospel of Matthew closes with Jesus' Great Commission to the assembled disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a). According to this command, a rounded understanding of Jesus' teachings about how humans should live is a key dimension for becoming a Christian, and the life of the church should reflect this.

THE SERMON ON the Mount in Matthew 5-7 brings together in compact form main teachings of Jesus about God's intentions for human living. Some scholars believe that the Sermon was first used in the apostolic church as a catechism, a body of instruction, for persons turning to Christ and coming into the fellowship of the church. In any case the closing parable makes clear that all those who truly look to Jesus as Lord will take the Sermon with utmost seriousness and strive to live it out.

In that body of teachings, those about how to live love toward enemies (Matthew 5:38-48) are the hardest ones to accept and live by. Rejecting all resort to violence and living love toward enemies (especially those who enforce injustice) is not the center and essence of Christianity, though many Christians in the peace and justice movement try to make it that. But this stance does correlate in a crucial way with the center, that is, with God's acting in Jesus Christ.

In the gospel story, human presumption and defiance of God came to culminating expression in those who opposed Jesus and moved to do away with him. Human sin and the sin of each of us converged into the determination to kill that One whose challenge to human waywardness could not be tolerated. Christ calls all who are his to live toward opponents and enemies the love that he lived toward us.

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Jesus had to deal with the question of how to face enemies in an establishment defending unjust social structures. As the temptation narratives bring out, he refused to become a military messiah. He would not let himself be pressed into the role of aspirant earthly king (John 6:15), using violence to set things right. In Gethsemane he could have asked God to send 12 legions of angels to protect him, but he had come to understand that this would not be God's will and way (Matthew 26:53-54). He let his enemies, the managers of that society, do their worst to him. He took to himself that massed onslaught of enmity, viciousness, arrogance, and abandonment, the convergence of all that has so darkly shaped human history. But Jesus came out of death; he returned to draw into his loving embrace those who had deserted him and all those whose wrongdoing had taken him to the cross.

THE PEACE WITNESS along with the nonviolent struggle for justice is not some optional accessory in Christian living. It is grounded in a key part of the teachings of Jesus drawn together in the Sermon on the Mount. But more than that, it has to do with living out in frail human response an intimation of and a correlate to what Jesus lived out in going to his death for our salvation. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.... While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:8, 10a). Our initiatives toward enemies should come as an extension of God's supreme initiative toward us.

When Christians slaughter enemies in war or when they align themselves with the military and with instruments of mass murder such as nuclear weapons, they go against the very structure of God's saving acts in Jesus Christ. They may give much emphasis to Jesus as Savior and to receiving salvation, but they participate in or support actions that are the total opposite of those acts. Toward their enemies they do the reverse of what God has done toward them as enemies. On this side of things, what they do negates the heart of the atonement.

Striving for peace and justice has far more depth and grandeur when it is seen in this way as a most decisive correlate in our living out a response to the incomprehensible marvel of how God met enemies in the execution of Jesus of Nazareth. To make of that effort the heart and essence of Christianity separates it from that grounding and leaves it a partial thing dependent basically on human aspiration and commitment. The discipleship stance of living for peace and justice is an integral part of knowing "the breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:18-19). That is prominence and place enough for it. ■

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